Epistemic marginalisation and the seductive power of art

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Abstract

Many voices and stories have been systematically silenced in interpersonal conversations, political deliberations and historical narratives. Recalcitrant and interrelated patterns of epistemic, political, cultural and economic marginalisation exclude individuals as knowers, citizens, agents. Two questions lie at the centre of this paper, which focuses on the epistemically – but also politically, culturally, and economically – dominant: How can we sabotage the dominant's investment in their own ignorance of unjust silencing? How can they be seduced to become acute perceivers of others' experiences of oppression and reckon with their own participation in it? Situated at the intersection between political theory, aesthetics, and epistemology, this paper contributes a so-far-unexplored suggestion: that certain literary works create epistemic friction between shared, entrenched prejudices on the one hand, and representations of epistemic exclusion or authority, on the other. Their power to illuminate ideational, moral, and experiential limitations makes them valuable tools in problematising, rendering visible and dislocating epistemic injustice, as well as other marginalisations it intersects with. To advance this argument, the paper relies on insights from aesthetics, unpacking fiction's multidimensional epistemic potential. Audre Lorde exemplifies literary works' ability to seductively sabotage bias and provide audiences with prosthetic visions of unfamiliar experiences of marginalisation.

Keywords

epistemic marginalisation, fiction, epistemic sabotage, prosthetic knowledge, epistemic friction, Audre Lorde

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The Problem

Many voices and stories have been systematically silenced in interpersonal conversations, political deliberations and historical narratives. Recalcitrant and interrelated patterns of epistemic, political, cultural and economic marginalisation exclude individuals as knowers, citizens, agents. Two questions lie at the centre of this paper, which focuses on the epistemically – but also politically, culturally, and economically – dominant: How can we sabotage the dominant's investment in their own ignorance of unjust silencing? How can they be seduced to become acute perceivers of others' experiences of oppression and reckon with their own participation in it? Situated at the intersection between political theory, aesthetics, and epistemology, this paper proposes artistically-induced epistemic friction as a fruitful answer.

The technical term 'epistemic injustice' refers to arbitrary distributions of epistemic authority, as well as exclusions from processes of collective meaning-making, due to resilient group biases. While Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* (2007) rejuvenated the debate (e.g. Alcoff, 2010; Maitra, 2010; Dotson, 2011, 2012; Anderson, 2012; Polhaus, 2012; Origgi, 2012; Bohman, 2012; Medina, 2013b; Kwong, 2015; Sherman, 2016), the topic has been of ongoing interest in feminist (e.g. Lugones, 1987; Harding, 1991; Hornsby and Langton, 1998; Alcoff, 2000), critical race (e.g. Mills, 2007; Collins, 2008), and postcolonial theory (e.g. Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 1998, 2016; Mignolo, 2009; de Sousa Santos, 2014). Debates focus on the typology of epistemic

injustice, attributions of responsibility, its relation to other injustices, its pernicious effects on individuals and communities, as well as strategies to counter such effects. The starting point here is that a plausible and politically relevant theory of epistemic injustice must simultaneously address individual responsibility for, and structural causes of, epistemic injustice. Moreover, it must situate epistemic injustice within broader patterns of political, cultural, and economic marginalisation.

This paper proposes that literary works are important, yet unexplored, resources in combating epistemic injustice.[i] Different forms of artistic expression often help victims and their communities articulate and communicate their experiences. However, our focus lies with certain literary works' epistemic value for the epistemically dominant, who have a vested interest in their own ignorance. Literature's seductive ability to illuminate ideational, experiential, and moral limitations renders it a valuable ally in the effort to apprehend the causes, mechanics, and effects of epistemic injustice – and of other injustices it compounds. Literary encounters might also fuel political solidarity and struggles: they could be valuable to resisters of all stripes in challenging entrenched exclusions. An engagement with Audre Lorde's theory and poetry will hopefully exemplify the plausibility of this theoretical proposal.

I first locate the paper within the literature, outlining its main assumptions and providing an account of artistically induced epistemic friction that is ideational, moral, and experiential. The second section invites an excursus into the philosophy of art and unpacks artworks' capacity to seductively sabotage entrenched exclusionary habits of

thought. Certain works can help perpetrators and witnesses of epistemic injustice grasp the impact it has on victims' lives, acknowledge historically dismissed epistemic agents, and reckon with their own contribution to epistemic marginalisations. The third section introduces Audre Lorde's theoretical and poetic work. Lorde invites readers to become acute perceivers of experiences of epistemic injustice, prosthetically incorporate the perspective of the silenced into their pool of hermeneutical resources, and reflect on their own arbitrary privilege. The paper concludes by addressing several potential criticisms.

Epistemic Friction: Ideational, Moral, Experiential

Miranda Fricker analysed two modalities of epistemic injustice (2007). Testimonial injustice obtains when a prejudiced hearer deflates a speaker's credibility, while hermeneutical injustice covers non-accidental gaps in the collective pool of epistemic sources, created by erasing some groups' experience from collective memory. Both forms presuppose cognitive and affective investments in negative stereotypes of certain individuals, which have a negative impact on the speaker as a knower and, more generally, as a human being. The harm is epistemic, but can extend to professional, economic, material, and psychological spheres. Women, Black people, sexual minorities, and the poor have historically experienced the simultaneous effect of these injustices. Testimonially, their interventions are not taken up or are not even solicited because, as speakers, they suffer from entrenched credibility deficits.[ii] When

prejudices are systematic and internalised, the victim's development as a knower is thwarted (p. 58). Hermeneutically, members of disadvantaged groups do not participate in meaning-production processes on an equal footing with privileged individuals.[iii]

Given that epistemic prejudice is hard to identify and acknowledge, tackling these injustices requires fine-tuned, powerful responses. I argue that certain literary works have several characteristics that make them particularly suitable for dislocating epistemic injustice. Before outlining the main argument, two preliminary points are necessary.

First, many privileged individuals are unreflective about their own disproportionate epistemic authority and their prejudices' impact on everyday judgments. And yet, given the prevalence of evidence that contradicts preconceived ideas, ignoring it requires effort, by individuals and collectives alike (Pohlhaus, 2012). Therefore, epistemic injustices are frequently the combined result of an arrogant failure to confront cognitive limitations, but also of active – though not always conscious – efforts not to acknowledge the existence of an epistemic other. This is not a matter of bad luck – as Fricker suggests – but the result of a *need not to know* by the dominant: knowing would destabilise their identity and sense of entitlement (Medina, 2012, p. 215). The clearest example is the erasure of shameful episodes and of certain inconvenient groups' voices from political memory, science, and art, (i.e. history and science manuals, public museums, monuments, rituals, and inventories of scientific breakthroughs). In other words, as Charles Mills poignantly argued, we are

responsible for the epistemic environment we live in and we do have some agency to worsen or improve epistemic injustice, individually and collectively (2007). Therefore, a plausible and potentially effective redress project must affirm both individuals' and collectives' responsibility for epistemic injustice and valorise both individual virtues and structural reform.

A second point worth making is that poverty, gender oppression, racialisation, unequal access to education and professions, ethnocentrism, and cultural imperialism constitute the non-epistemic sources of epistemic injustice (McConkey, 2004; Anderson, 2012; Bohman, 2012; Medina, 2013b). Given that epistemic, ethical, economic, cultural, and political marginalisations are interlinked, appropriate remedies cannot surgically address only the epistemic dimension of injustice. Educational reform – ensuring equal access and quality, making assessment anonymous, and demystifying history curricula (Alcoff, 2010, Langton, 2010) – is imperative. Revising the myths of recalcitrant white male academia (Mills, 2007) and enabling its pluralisation – as well as that of the publishing industry – is equally important. Also problematic are our selective, biased habits of historical remembering. Most importantly, we need to fundamentally change the allocation of citizenship status, and of the resources necessary for meaningfully exercising citizen rights. To achieve these goals, individual epistemic modesty must be supplemented with collective political mobilisation:

> [W]e are each complicit in the perpetuation of unjust structures, practices, and institutions. Moral responsibility concerns not only what I can and should do, but also what we can and should do together (Haslanger, 2015, p. 12).

Motivating individuals to join collective struggles against epistemic injustice requires prior processes of individual and collective acknowledgement and engagement with the reality of epistemic injustice and the injustices it interlocks with. The epistemically dominant must learn to respond to evidence about the other's credibility, while simultaneously reflecting on themselves as positioned knowers enjoying credibility excesses. Such learning has structural preconditions. As Medina aptly suggests, spaces where productive epistemic friction between different perspectives can yield alternative sources of meaning must be institutionalised (2013b). This paper proposes that certain literary works can open such spaces.[iv]

Friction refers to the discomfort individuals experience when confronted with different pictures of epistemic authority and agency than the ones they are invested in cognitively, emotionally, and sensorially. It highlights three categories of limitations, which converge when we inflict – or contribute to – epistemic injustice: of our ideas, concepts and the collective pool of meaning they constitute (conceptual-hermeneutical); of our sense of justice (moral-political); and of our capacity to feel with the other (emotional-sensorial). These dimensions of experience are only analytically separable; they are imbricated in everyday experience: systems of beliefs are internalised, emotionally anchored, and embodied, while our emotional reactions and

practices of embodiment translate and reinforce systems of beliefs.[v] Let's unpack these in turn.

The encounter with certain works can, first, cause tension between our concepts and beliefs about, for example, knowledge, epistemic agency, truth, epistemic authority, and justice on the one hand, and the artistic representations of epistemic injustice or authority on the other. This I call *ideational epistemic friction*. Philosophers of art propose that literature, painting, cinema, and music can stimulate us cognitively: they prompt thoughts, perceptions, and desires. Through selection, amplification, correlation, or juxtaposition of various objects, art can 'draw attention to features of objects, place them in context, display their consequences, and draw comparisons between them.' (Young, 2001, p. 82) We form new ideas in response to scenarios in a novel, play, poem, or painting. These ideas may be clear and take propositional form or remain latent and inchoate, actualised in future interactions, often unconsciously. In this sense, art can enhance our practical knowledge. Certain artworks can also provide conceptual knowledge.[vi] In engaging with complex plots, questioning, interpreting, and judging events and characters in a novel, poem, or novella, we may become aware of the limits of our concepts and deep-rooted beliefs, and of our habits of seeing – and feeling about – the social world. Exposure to diverse uses of the same concept in different fictional circumstances helps us realise the tension between our understanding of a concept's range and its possible range. Novel, unexpected uses of a concept to cover events, actions, characters we do not usually associate with it can stimulate epistemic friction. Changes in a spectator's conceptual

apparatus trigger both implicit and explicit changes in thought, feeling, and behaviour (Wilson, 1983).

Regarding epistemic marginalisation, the limits of our concepts translate – at the macro level – into the limits of our pool of epistemic sources, i.e. of collective categories and meanings for making sense of reality. In challenging and/or refining received ideas and beliefs, expanding the scope of our concepts and/or proposing new concepts, literary works can illuminate overlapping injustices in general, and oft-unacknowledged epistemic injustice in particular. Moreover, they can challenge ideas about the distribution of epistemic authority among citizens along gendered, racialised, classed or other dimensions of distinction, and focus our attention on groups' unequal access to institutional meaning-making processes.

Second, certain literary works can cause *moral epistemic friction*: they perplex us by revealing the limits of our sense of justice, i.e. of who is owed duties of justice, including duties of epistemic justice: to listen to, solicit testimony from, and include in collective hermeneutical processes. Additionally, they can problematise injustices citizens rarely perceive and often unreflectively inflict on others – epistemic injustice being one such example.

Aestheticians think art crucial for 'moral agents' need to perceive morally relevant aspects of experience, to have morally sensitive and apt emotional responses, and to take up morally challenging perspectives in the imagination.' (John, 2001, p. 335). Depictions of moral exemplars richly illustrate moral attitudes, feelings and sensibilities in imagined circumstances, highlighting their relevance, nuances, and

weight. In resonating with spectators' moral reality, works can push them to think and feel, to see the limits of their own experience and coarse-grained image of the moral-political universe. In richly experiencing art, we are invited 'to perceive, imagine and feel aptly' (p. 339): to ponder over the scope of our sense of justice, i.e. the scope of our community of moral relevance. Through a thick engagement with a multiplicity of particulars, art can diffuse the temptation for simple, stark moral dichotomies and reasoning (Nussbaum, 1990). The knowledge we get is practical, 'about how to act and how to look at moral situations.' (Young, 2001, p. 101). The development of 'a rich qualitative seeing' and 'discerning perceptions' can make us, in Henry James's famous words, 'finely aware and richly responsible' to the mire of moral complexity – conflict, ambiguity, riskiness – we live in (Nussbaum, 1990, pp. 36, 142).

Zooming in on epistemic injustice, artworks could call attention to individual and collective moral duties to remedy unjust distributions of epistemic authority. *Moral epistemic friction* between our unreflective sense of epistemic duties and the artistic representation of epistemic harms or epistemic agency can help expand the scope of our obligations and rectify deep-seated ideas about the economy of credibility. In response to poignant representations, we feel outrage and indignation – typical moral reactive attitudes – on behalf of the epistemically marginalised. Such reactions constitute a first step towards recognising and building solidarity with the silenced. Depictions of exemplars of epistemic resistance can lead us to reflect on our

own participation in – or indifference to – overlapping patterns of oppression and their nefarious effects.

Finally, certain representations of epistemic injustice can highlight the limits of our capacity to feel for those whose lived experience we cannot – or will not – grasp. *Experiential epistemic friction* emerges from our failures to register and form a concern for the epistemic, psychological, political, economic, and cultural costs victims of epistemic injustice experience. Thus, they reveal the bounds of our emotional sensibility, i.e. of our affective responsiveness to the complex suffering of the silenced. Additionally, since the difficulty of imagining how it would be to live their life is one of the main obstacles, it would be productive to harness these representations' power to help us transcend our limited experiential horizon. Thus, artworks teach us 'what it would feel like' to live through certain events, to experience the world from a certain perspective or feel a certain emotion. Nussbaum argues that novels – and we can add other art forms – push us to imagine possible relations between ourselves and the protagonists, identify with them, and perceive the similarities or differences between us. (1990, p. 95) Emotionally, artworks represent emotions *per se*, but also objects associated with particular emotions. (John, 2001) To the extent that these associations are bewildering or upsetting, they stress the limits of our capacity to feel in relation to certain members of our community. More precisely, representations of experientially different perspectives challenge spectators' emotional repertoire, including the scope of their empathy.

Returning to epistemic injustice, certain literary texts can expose us to what it feels to be its victim: systematically discounted as a credible knower and prevented from contributing to collective meanings. Representations of the emotional costs of affirming one's epistemic authority can be illuminating, compounded as they are across several dimensions of one's social existence. As Lorde shows, the frustrating and humiliating ways in which one experiences 'deafness'[vii] and indifference – by fellow citizens and institutions alike – can be made present to the dominant through artistic encounters. Moreover, depictions of epistemic injustice can prefigure an alternative world, where the pain associated with marginalisation disappears.

For epistemic friction to emerge in these three registers, spectators must be seduced into renouncing the search for coherence between their past experiences and artistic representations. One's experience is limited by positionality; therefore, coherence cannot reliably test the validity of knowledge obtained from artistic encounters.[viii] Relying on our emotions as a compass to the 'rightness of a perspective'[ix] is also problematic: our emotional investments are never neutral. For example, we can feel very strongly attached to skewed visions of epistemic competence because of our emotional investment in arbitrary hierarchies of epistemic authority.

The rightness of perspectives emerging from an artwork is a function of its affirming equal epistemic status and giving voice to the silenced – thus rendering more complex a society's vision of reality. Reductionist and exclusionary representations – that affirm differential epistemic, political, cultural status – are not

knowledge-enhancing, but reality-confirming. The more intricate and inclusive a picture of our epistemic, moral, emotional, and sensorial reality an artwork presents, the more likely it is to enrich our vision.

Artworks can also serve cathartic and therapeutic functions in that they enable the marginalised to communicate the experience of epistemic injustice. This paper, however, focuses on those works that can cause ideational, moral, and experiential friction in the horizons of the dominant, either by revealing the other's experience of silence or their epistemic authority. In other words, we are interested in artworks that constitute epistemically powerful media of knowledge and potential tools for social change, which can seduce the dominant into practices of self-knowledge, as well as political transformation. To the extent that the friction catalysed by these artworks reverberates more broadly, the potential for solidarity across epistemic boundaries increases. When institutionalised – through their canonisation or introduction in school curricula – they can have a lasting effect on the distribution of epistemic authority and the collective pool of meaning.[x]

Art's Knowledge

Before delving into the mechanisms of friction and the faculties involved, a caveat is necessary: this paper does not propose artworks as alternatives, but as complements to the legal, educational, political, and economic strategies outlined in the literature. Given the connection between epistemic and other injustices and their psycho-political underpinnings, theorists must search for multi-pronged approaches to the

thorny problem of socialising aptly perceiving citizens. Resonating literary works constitute just one more path to explore.

In considering art's[xi] epistemic functions, philosophers have argued that it can provide us with an awareness of, a perspective on, or insight into various dimensions of our world (Wilson, 1983; John, 2002; Young, 2001). In political theory, following Hannah Arendt's argument that storytelling discloses important aspects of reality, researchers have claimed that both historical and fictional accounts can 'stimulate and enrich political thought, as well as destabilise reductive, obfuscating narratives' (Mediatore, 2003), help us comprehend unprecedented historical events (Disch, 1994; Pía Lara, 2007; Bleicker, 2009; Thaler, 2014; Schiff, 2014), illuminate the meaning of historical contingencies (Hutchinson, 2010), denounce historical injustices (Mihai, 2014), and serve as means of self-presentation for subjects involved in struggles for social inclusion (Pía Lara, 1998). Political theorists generally agree that certain representations can sometimes trigger individual and collective processes of reckoning with the limits of self-knowledge, knowledge about one's relationality with others and about the political world.

In what follows I discuss the *features* and *processes* by virtue of which certain – not all – literary works can feed individual and collective transformation. The argument is that certain works engage with the dominant's ideational, moral and experiential (emotional-sensorial) abilities, simultaneously puzzling them intellectually, awakening their moral capacities, intensifying their feelings, and surprising them sensorially. That is to say, they stimulate *processes* of epistemic friction

between, on the one hand, concepts, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and experiences of an object – in our case, the epistemic other – and, on the other hand, the representation of this object in art. Thus, they can undermine the *need not to know,* rearranging desires and subverting the 'monoculture' of most minds.[xii]

This paper zooms in on epistemic friction that capitalises on literary works' capacity to *pleasurably sabotage* our complex epistemic limitations and *prosthetically*[xiii] *expand* the pool of hermeneutical resources on which our engagement with the world relies. Several *features* make them particularly suited for provoking friction without risking reactionary entrenchment.

First, novels, novellas, or poems are located within particular lifeworlds. They concretise, particularise, and exemplify broader processes and experiences shared by groups of people. Particularisation facilitates rich and detailed accounts of the multiple and invisible ways that a certain political problem infects a specific person's life: her relationships, professional development, psychological wellbeing, and political efficacy. Alison Landsberg coined the term 'prosthetic memory' to refer to engagements with artworks – including highly popular forms – that invite the viewer to see the world from a different point of view, through a different pair of eyes, from a different embodied positionality and emotional horizon (2004). Through encounters with fiction, we acquire prosthetic knowledge about experiences we never had.

I argue that this knowledge is prosthetic in two senses. While artworks track experiences in the social world, these experiences are – and perpetually remain – alien to us; we never fully master or own them.[xiv] Secondly, these experiences are mediated

through fiction. Hence they will inevitably be experienced as awkward, enabling our travelling beyond our narrow position, while sitting uncomfortably within our worldview. Prostheses can facilitate thought, emotions, and sensorial awareness in that they push us to think beyond our immediate needs and wants. Particular representations of epistemic injustice/competence can sit uneasily with received ideas about who has epistemic authority and who is a knower, confronting us through the encounter with a different vista over the social world. Experiences that readers might have only an abstract idea of are thus made vividly present. Under certain conditions, the encounter with particularity though fiction can prosthetically support her imagination in its active engagement with the world.

This brings us to the second point: literary works do not confront passive spectators. To the contrary, they invite spectators to relate, from within their own position, to the characters and situations depicted. The account of the imagination presupposed here is active: it is something we do, building on our own experience and memories. Medina argues that the imagination actively builds on past experiences and uses them as raw material for dealing with new, unprecedented experiences (2013a, p. 319). From a different perspective, Keightley and Pickering propose the concept of 'mnemonic imagination' to highlight the interplay between these two faculties: our memories are organised into coherent narratives via the imagination, while the imagination builds on sources provided by memory (2012). The imagination is also at work in bringing our memories into relation with the experiences of others who are differently positioned. This process is not just about the intellectual

contemplation of images and representations, but also about relying on and rehearsing embodied explorations of the world (Medina, 2013a, p. 331). Through training exercises – what Medina calls 'mimicking' – we learn to imagine others' experiences.[xv] This paper proposes that the imagination sometimes helps incorporate the others' experiences *prosthetically* into our own pool of hermeneutical sources, and that fiction can play a crucial role in this respect.

Fiction is particularly propitious for this task. We feel for a character because we dramatically rehearse our learnt ways of putting ourselves in the shoes of the other (Moran, 1994; Medina, 2013a). We project ourselves and our baggage into alternative times and counterfactual scenarios. A gap opens between the viewer's horizon and that of those represented in the artwork and in 'this liminal, but creative space, the mnemonic imagination is at work' (Keightley and Pickering, 2012, p. 189). Productive epistemic friction can emerge in this opening through the interplay between memory and the imagination. I argue that successful friction results in the imagination stretching to prosthetically include others' experiences – of authority or marginalisation – within our repertoire of hermeneutical resources, resources we actualise practically at various points in time. However, success is never guaranteed: the individual might reject the prosthesis, her memories, habits of thought, and emotional investments weighing her down into despondency or resentment.[xvi]

Given that the imagination does not start *ab ovo* – it functions positionally – how adventurous or reticent we are to travel varies across individuals and groups.[xvii] Different degrees of friction correspond to different degrees of identification. Readers

will move on a continuum ranging from refusal to deep connection: memory acts both as a source for and a break on the imagination, setting the parameters of the possible. One's positionality is anchored within a system of meanings and experiences that outline the horizon of expectations. The epistemic dimension of these systems relates to the subject's own authority and standards of knowledge, always understood in relation to others' status as knowers. Representations of epistemic authority that destabilise one's beliefs, emotions, and expectations in relation to who is a knower can produce discomfort and confusion, which can sometimes lead to reactionary entrenchment. This is why a discussion of artworks' *unpredictable* capacity to *seductively sabotage* epistemic bias is necessary here.

Third, the seductive sabotage relies on two main features of literary works: their hedonic and mediated nature. While Medina has put his faith in hermeneutical heroes (2013b), I propose that the combination of hedonic and cognitive processes – of pleasure and knowledge – can lure spectators to travel outside their comfort zone, welcome epistemic friction, and accept the prosthetic addition of the others' experience within their hermeneutical pool of resources. The metaphor of 'seduction' refers to the very fact that pleasure is involved in the consumption of artistic products. This paper does not embrace a simplistic understanding of pleasure, but one that incorporates discomfort and pain. In this sense it subscribes to a 'rich theory of art' according to which individuals purposefully seek and enjoy painful art because they appreciate 'experiences that are cognitively, sensorially, and affectively engaging: that is, rich experiences' (Smuts 2014, p. 132). Reflecting on the humanities, Spivak uses the

metaphor of 'contamination' (2013, p. 9), which is just as effective at articulating the idea that literary works insinuate themselves into the reader's memory via the imagination, as 'poison' or 'medicine' (p. 152), without us being fully aware of how exactly they get us to imaginatively reconfigure our memories, beliefs, and emotions.[xviii] It is in this sense that the encounter with literary works amounts to a hedonic sabotage of exclusionary epistemic perspectives and a prosthetic engagement with different views.

Fourth, the travelling that art embarks us upon is 'safe' because the encounter is mediated. The spectator knows the representation 'is not exactly about me' – but about types, some of which are mere possibilities – and can therefore feel freer, allowing herself to learn, be captivated, and vicariously experience affectively and sensorially through the representation, beyond her parochial sphere of interaction.

For artworks to sabotage bias and produce friction, they need to fulfil several conditions. We are looking *first*, for works that do not exclusively represent epistemic injustices in individualising and psychologising ways, as isolated accidents or misfortunes. The stories we tell about epistemic exclusions are crucial for determining the remedies we are ready to provide. To the extent that individualising and psychologising accounts dominate public debates, to the extent that we cannot see the forest for the trees, our imagination and the solutions it outlines remain limited. Bringing social and political forces back into the picture should not, however, lead us to absolve individuals of any responsibility. Representations of epistemic injustice that balance the focus on individual failures with a concern for the structural preconditions

of those failures are more likely to illuminate spectators in ways that reveal the limits of both self-knowledge and collective epistemic resources.

Second, we need artworks that seduce the spectator to immerse herself productively and experimentally in alternative scenarios, scenarios that are uncomfortable, but attractive and tolerable because of the pleasurable elements in art and its mediated nature. Predictably by now, art that shows the limits of our conceptual apparatus, of our sense of justice, and of our ability to hear and feel for the other (i.e. art that can lure us away from our own epistemic laziness and arrogance, and motivate us to initiate transformative political action) is desirable. In this sense, artworks that show historically excluded knowers as possessing epistemic authority or resisting exclusion are as valuable as representations of the painful experience of silencing. Conceptually, artworks that highlight the insularisation of the epistemically dominant from alternative communities of meaning are extremely valuable. Morally, depictions of exclusions from the moral community can lead us to question the limits of our sense of justice and its adjacent reactive attitudes. Experientially, attunement to fellow human beings is the hoped-for effect of epistemic friction through artistic encounters, protected from the risks and dangers of real-life embroilments. Because of these functions, certain artworks can kick-start collective political action to alleviate the pernicious effects of epistemic – and interrelated – injustices.

To illustrate this abstract theoretical proposal, the paper now turns to a body of work that invites us to conceptually, morally, and experientially (emotionally and sensorially) visit the world of the epistemically excluded.

A Sewerplant Grows in Harlem: Redeeming the Power of the Word

Audre Lorde (1934–1992) is one of the most distinctive and celebrated voices in black feminist theory and poetry. A militant and the author of several poetry books, philosophical essays, and a novel, she was the founder of the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, whose mission was to disseminate and encourage work by black women authors. The 'black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet warrior' dedicated her work to challenging interlinked epistemic, political, and social injustices against black women in US academia, within the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s[xix], and in society at large. This section argues that Lorde's work exemplifies the argument advanced here. The path-breaking character of her interventions in debates over racialisation, gender, sexuality and class, the enthusiastic reception of her work, and its inclusion in various humanities curricula make Lorde a perfect illustration of how art's power can be harnessed to create epistemic friction, reverberate, and politically mobilise individuals against complex injustices.[xx] Her work has inspired processes of self-recreation in her audiences and has fuelled collective struggles for equality in the US and South Africa. The (partial) canonisation of her work means that she can still provoke epistemic friction inside and between individuals coming to her work from various positions in the epistemic hierarchy of contemporary societies. I first outline Lorde's philosophical account of poetry's role in an unjust society and then briefly analyse a poem that seductively sabotages epistemic bias and prosthetically supports readers in their encounter with the experience of the epistemically excluded.

In *Poetry Is Not a Luxury* (1984), Lorde articulates her ideas on the relationship between poetry and action. Poetry simultaneously constitutes a source of knowledge and a form of resistance that can counteract entrenched epistemic exclusions. Poetry births new *concepts*: it can 'give name to the nameless so it can be thought', enabling the marginalised to capture their own reality in language and communicate it, overcoming the silence imposed on them, a silence they often internalise out of fear (p. 37). New concepts challenge the dominant's limited common sense and invite her to think about the limits of the collective pool of meanings. Moreover, poetry provides the audience with *experiential* knowledge as it distils the experience of the excluded. In it, their hopes, anger, and fears are expressed and shared in a way that 'feels right' (p. 37). This aspect is cathartically useful for the victims, but also epistemically valuable for the dominant, who are invited to see what it feels like to be on the receiving end of injustice. Writing poetry is therefore not a luxury, but an existential necessity, a bulwark against 'falsely benign accusations of childishness, of non-universality, of self-centeredness, of sensuality' (p. 38). In this enumeration, we recognise the typical manoeuvres of systemic epistemic discrediting that normally target women and racialised groups. The essay thus denounces the strategic use of language and labelling for delegitimising purposes. Heretical poems are fuelled by dreams of alternative futures of equality and constitute, in themselves, forms of self-affirmation and daring political action. Consequently, for Lorde poetry can conceptually, experientially, and morally enrich the poet's self-understanding, express agency, and propose a different future to those who can read it responsively.

It is, simultaneously, a means to care for and protect the epistemic self of the excluded, and a call to take responsibility for injustice, clearly addressed to resisters and the epistemically dominant.

The author is aware of the fragility and limitations of success when it comes to challenging epistemic hierarchies within 'structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanisation' (p. 39). She knows epistemic injustice is always coupled with political, educational, and economic marginalisation. Establishing 'one beachhead of real resistance to the deaths we are expected to live' requires courage and a language that can express the dreams of the excluded to those who have not been listening (p. 38). Poetry is a vehicle for the courage to see and speak in a different voice, to confront and denounce the epistemic oppressor, revealing the epistemic harms of infantilisation and delegitimisation.

Lorde's poem that directly tackles the experience of epistemic injustice is *A Sewerplant Grows in Harlem, Or I'm A Stranger Here Myself When Does The Next Swan Leave* (1997, p. 109). First, it provides us with important experiential insights into the lives of those not heard despite 'bursting with knowledge' and screaming 'over and over' in ears 'asleep or drugged perhaps by a dream of words.' The lack of responsiveness by hearers resembles sleep or narcosis, a slumber induced by stereotypical projections ('dreams') of what the other is like. For Lorde, sleep and narcosis are metaphors for a blunting of the senses and capacity for reflection, leading to repeated failures of uptake, and the associated annihilation of the speaker as a knowing subject. The frustration with, and the deadly effect of, being blocked by

unresponsive interlocutors is represented though an amplified repetition of verses that simulate an automatic message for defective phonelines:

> The mind
>
> you have reached is not a working mind
>
> Please hang up
>
> And die again. (1997, p. 109)

Lorde does not view epistemic injustice as merely interpersonal, but as structural. She refers to the powerful 'editorial They' who 'smother the actual Us' trapped in a room with 'filthy windows' and a *No Exit* sign above its only door. Read literally, Lorde might be referring to unequal access to publishing in the US of her lifetime, a situation she worked to remedy by founding her own press. Read metaphorically, the 'editorial They' stands for the hermeneutical injustice perpetrated against voices excluded from contributing to collective processes of meaning-making, the dominant's insensitivity to their vision of reality and to the walls separating the occupants of various positions in the social hierarchy. Escaping depends on the prisoners' word hopefully being 'made flesh made steel made shit'[xxi] and rammed into the door like a 'homemade bomb' or flushing it in a verbal fountain that brings forth a new reality. The trust in the word's capacity to make possible actual social change is hinted at from the beginning of the poem. Lorde seems to be inciting the epistemically excluded to speak and engage in forms of political action that can effectively undermine the 'editorial They', i.e. make hearers receptive.[xxii] As Ferguson (2012) emphasises, personal and political transformations are indissolubly coupled in Lorde's work.

Ideationally, the poem points to the urgency of change – political, epistemic, economic – and proposes that redemption still lies with the word, which can spur political action. Read alongside the essay *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*, the poem suggests poetry constitutes a weapon against the scatological nightmare of exclusion. *Morally*, it has three objectives: to express moral indignation, to articulate the psychological and identity harms associated with being shut down, and to imperiously ask the sleeping to stretch their sense of justice to cover those whom they have historically excluded. *Conceptually*, the poem expands our understanding of what it means to die. In denying the speaker the status of knower and equal contributor to a society's conversation about collective goals, unresponsive hearers condemn her to a form of social death. As a natural phenomenon, death is marked by the inability to speak, but Lorde wants to expand the domain of the concept by using it to cover the experience of not being heard despite speaking, over and over again. This is a recurring strategy in Lorde's work, as she repeatedly refers to the experience of political, economic and epistemic exclusion in terms of the 'death we are expected to live' (Lorde, 1984, p. 38). Finally, *A Sewerplant* is revealing *experientially* because of the way in which it intensely represents the death-like effect of not being heard. The emotional and sensorial effects of epistemic and political marginalisation are made immediate using scatological metaphors. Residing at the margins is like being smothered in shit, in a room with dirty windows. Not getting one's voice across is like talking to a toilet. It is also emotionally draining: being edited out of the social conversation feels like being condemned to an iterative death: 'Please hang up and die again'. A moving and

dignified plea for solidarity and for alleviating the horrid effects of silencing emerges from the text.

Through its amplifications and juxtapositions, the poem challenges the reader, inviting her to confront the structural reality of epistemic injustice and the experiential effect of being excluded as a knower. It aims to dynamise the mnemonic imagination and stimulate the spectator sensorially, morally, and emotionally, sabotaging her received ideas about differential epistemic authority. It also offers a prosthetic view into another's experience, an experience one can only know imperfectly, but which one must make all efforts to account for. Lorde talks back to the 'editorial They', preventing easy colonisation and appropriation by the audience. At a time of dominant white, heteronormative, feminist literature, it contributes to the pluralisation of the landscape; the poem constitutes itself as a political act. For the marginalised reader, it is an invitation to echo the challenge to 'them', i.e. to use the word politically. To the privileged reader, it is a provocation to open herself to new meanings and concepts, to expand the scope of her sense of justice, to respond to and feel for the other. And that requires waking up from the narcosis and getting one's mind working.

'Stop the Chatter Inside Their Heads'[xxiii]

This paper has proposed that certain literary works can produce friction in the interstitial space between the spectator's beliefs – emotionally anchored and embodied – *and* the experience of the other, as represented artistically. Friction is

productive to the extent that the other's experience is added prosthetically to the viewer's repertoire of knowledge and meanings. The reader learns to see the world from a different point of view – through a different pair of eyes, from a different embodied positionality and emotional horizon. Some of us are more seducible than others, depending on what memories we can tap into in responding to the visions of the world we are presented with in the artworks. Friction will not happen uniformly, across all persons, and therefore artworks' seduction work is unpredictable. Canonising heretical voices and including them in school and university humanities curricula can help their power to reverberate more broadly. Canonical hierarchies are sabotaged by rendering them permeable to resisters' voices. Before concluding, several potential criticisms need addressing.

First, one might worry this proposal is naïve as art has historically played ideological, propagandistic roles in oppressive societies. This paper has not expressed trust in art's transformational power *per se*. Art's seductive power can be – and historically has been – harnessed to confirm oppressive social relations. Not all artworks enrich and perplex us productively along the three dimensions outlined above; not *all* narratives are revelatory. On the contrary, many seduce us into insensitivity and thoughtlessness. The failure to provide epistemic insight cannot be explained – as many philosophers of art argue it can – by exclusive reference to the aesthetic qualities of a work of art. As a field of the social world, art is not immune to power relations: there is no point in investing in the chimera of artistic independence,[xxiv] as the artistic imagination is not necessarily emancipatory. Its value

depends on its content and use. Romantic beliefs in the heroic, independent artist should give way to the realisation that independence is a matter of degree: some artists do a better job than others of cultivating sufficient critical distance to provoke epistemic friction. What we are interested in here are those artworks that, one way or another, make visible epistemic exclusions.

Second, whose art is likely to cause epistemic friction? Should we focus on epistemically marginalised artists only? Friction-inducing works will find their authors both within and without the community of the epistemically marginalised. While this paper analyses Lorde's poetry, the commitment to the possibility of solidarity pushes us to extend our reach beyond work by the epistemically excluded. Just as there are many reality-confirming artworks by the dominant, plenty of works by epistemically oppressed individuals reproduce ideas about differential authority. We are interested here in writing by artists who unpack epistemic injustice, denounce unwarranted epistemic privilege, and propose alternative, democratic visions of our epistemic environment. Moreover, given everyone's responsibility for improving the epistemic environment of our societies, victims cannot bear alone the burden of fighting against recalcitrant and overlapping injustices. Different individuals will discharge this duty differently, depending on their resources and interests, thus showing solidarity with the historically silenced.[xxv]

Artists who are not themselves epistemically marginalised must avoid contributing indirectly to silencing, i.e. reproducing the very pathology they are trying to redress. There are multiple ethical risks associated with non-marginalised artists

tackling epistemic injustice. In imagining, the imaginer is in control, the imagined never 'talks back' (Spelman, 1990). Given how hermeneutical injustice often works beneath the radar of consciousness, there is always a danger that we mould the epistemically marginalised into a familiar stereotypical image we already have of her, all the while remaining ourselves safe from discomfort and perplexity. This is why, to the extent that mnemonic imagination can be of help, it must help us sensitise – rather than desensitise – ourselves to the other, render us and our sense of ourselves vulnerable, open us up to the possibility of our own self-transformation, and lead us to accept that our grasping the other can never amount to mastery. On the contrary, it is perpetually precarious and incomplete, a never-ending experimental process, one that should be polyphonic and kaleidoscopic (Medina, 2012). Provided an ethos of self-reflection and self-relativisation is in place, i.e. that the author's own voice speaks alongside – rather than instead of – the excluded, imagination can yield a multi-perspectival vision of our shared social world, thus catalysing productive epistemic friction and common practices of *political* resistance.

Third, are works that depict the misery and nefarious effects of epistemic injustice best for sabotaging bias and prosthetically travelling in the world of the other? From the beginning, this paper has argued that representations of epistemic authority by historically silenced individuals can also activate the mnemonic imagination productively. The *Neapolitan Quartet* (2012–2015) by the Italian novelist who writes under the pseudonym Elena Ferrante constitutes a relevant example in this sense. The now world-acclaimed *Quartet* follows the friendship between two

despairingly poor women from the outskirts of Naples, Elena and Lina, from childhood to old age. While female friendship is at the centre of the four novels, they also tackle the socio-economic, linguistic, gendered, and psychological obstacles that Elena successfully overcomes to find her voice and build an illustrious career as a feminist theorist and public intellectual in the Italy of the 1960s and 1970s. Ferrante's virtuosic writing seduces readers to enter a world of complex, overlapping exclusions, marked by poverty, religious conservatism, patriarchal violence, organised crime, and systemic failure. Prosthetically, readers encounter Elena's experience – her economic hardships, her chronic self-doubt in relation to the men writers in her life who misrecognise her merits, her difficulties in reconciling motherhood and writing. The text subtly sabotages assumptions about the classed and especially gendered distribution of philosophical insight, without, however, falling into reductionist tokenism. We are perpetually reminded of the contingency of Elena's success, given her starting point: without her superhuman industriousness, encouragement, and financial support by various teachers and mentors, as well as the availability of publicly funded education, she would not have succeeded. Moreover, the contrasting figure of Lina who, despite being intellectually brilliant, does not manage to escape her socio-economic and gendered position, keeps the reader grounded in the structural constellations that trap the silenced.[xxvi]

Lastly, how can we ensure that encounters with challenging artworks will not lead to negative reactions that block the possibility of epistemic friction? The answer is simple: we cannot. There will always be spectators who remain indifferent to artistic

seduction. Epistemic friction can be promoted and encouraged, but not regimented. The beliefs, values, interests, and emotional dispositions of the spectators are one important obstacle. The lack of exposure to art or an inadequate aesthetic socialisation – often related to class and other markers of social distinction – constitutes another important impediment. While receptiveness inescapably relies on a measure of effort and openness by the spectator, democratic societies have at their disposal institutional mechanisms to cultivate it: sponsoring citizens' more equal access to art, socializing their habits of appreciating art, and ensuring that the art they are exposed to is plurivocal. Ensuring a more equal access to funding and dissemination channels for all artists and expanding canons to include heretical authors constitute just two strategies democracies should avail themselves of in the effort to rectify skewed perceptions of who counts as a knower. Epistemic justice cannot emerge from episodic encounters; on the contrary, as Spivak so poignantly explains, it requires 'patient epistemological care' (2013, p. 519, n. 57). It is this paper's modest proposal that literary works can help the epistemically dominant deliver this type of care.

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[i] This paper belongs to a larger project, which covers other artistic forms, such as theatre and cinema. Due to space constraints and for the sake of theoretical precision, I focus here on literature.

[ii] The 'unintelligibility' of marginal voices refers to content but also form, i.e. the marginalised speak in a different 'voice' or style, alien to the hearer. Medina calls these the 'performative' characteristics of the communication (Medina, 2013b, p. 98).

[iii] Fricker thinks women's inability to grapple with the experience of sexual harassment before the concept was legally recognized is an example of hermeneutical injustice. This paper does not see these two forms as clearly separable or as exhausting the realm

of epistemic injustice. What is more, *contra* Fricker, counterhegemonic discourses are always developed by marginalised groups, who thus produce their own epistemic resources to grapple with their own experience.

[iv] Medina (2013b) argues epistemic friction is a precondition of change but he does not give an account of its mechanics and processes. I borrow this term from him and seek to theoretically unpack its complex nature and dynamics.

[v] For a modified Bourdieusian account of the relationship between ideational, emotional, and sensorial dimensions that I assume in this paper, see Mihai (2016).

[vi] For a dissenting view, see Lamarque and Olsen (1994).

[vii] This is Lorde's metaphor. I avoid metaphors like 'deafness' or 'blindness' to denote epistemic insensitivity, for they can contribute to the othering of disabled people. For a critical treatment of the metaphorical use of disability, see Mitchell and Snyder (2006).

[viii] Young proposes the coherence test (2001, p. 107).

[ix] John relies on the emotion test (2001, p. 336).

[x] 'The goal of teaching such a thing as literature is epistemological but also epistemic: transforming the way in which objects of knowledge are constructed; perhaps also shifting desires in the subject' (Spivak 2013, p. 41). Spivak also discusses 'staging collisions' between authors belonging to different traditions to destabilise hierarchies.

[xi] As a side note, this paper subscribes to an institutionalist view of the artworld – such as Pierre Bourdieu's – as a social field governed by rules, principles and hierarchies of value and power (1993). In unpacking the characteristics through which some

artworks become valuable instruments against epistemic injustice, I am referring to the conventions that structure this field and regulate access to it, highlighting how, under certain circumstances, these conventions can be mobilised productively.

[xii] For an undiluted trust in the humanities' power to rearrange desires and pluralise the cultures of the mind, see Spivak (2013).

[xiii] There is a rich and insightful literature in disability studies that dispels myths of full, able-bodied mastery and provides phenomenological accounts of gradual and heterogeneous – yet not always seamless and almost never complete – processes of accommodating oneself to and incorporating auxiliary objects (prostheses) into both one's consciousness and embodiment by individuals who become disabled. See Murray (2004); Davies (2006); Lane (2006); Lundberg et al. (2011); and Salamon (2012).

[xiv] We need to let go of the chimera that we could fully know and inhabit the position of the other. Beausoleil offers an insightful critique of mastery as the goal of any encounter with difference (2015).

[xv] While I agree with Medina's main argument, I need not accept his evolutionary paradigm for my purposes here.

[xvi] While Moran (1994) and Medina (2013a) do refer to Hume's discussion of moral certainty and habit as the most important obstacle to travelling through the imagination, they do not focus on this challenge. This paper highlights how the horizon within which the mnemonic imagination works can fuel epistemic insensitivity.

[xvii] For two different critical accounts of placing too much trust in imagination's emancipatory power see Schiff (2014) and Mihai (2016).

[xviii] There is a big debate in aesthetics over the authenticity of emotions experienced through fiction. I agree with Moran (1994) and Medina (2013a) that these emotions are real and that it is only the object of the emotion that is fictional. It is not the case that we are imagining a fictional emotion; we are imagining with emotion.

[xix] Ortega (2006) provides an excellent account of Lorde's potential antidotes to the ill of white feminist 'loving, knowing ignorance'.

[xx] For accounts of her poetic work and political activism, as well as her influence on individual self-creation and collective struggles see De Veaux (2004), Griffin and Parkerson (1995), Guerrero (2012). Aptheker (2012) provides an account of the enchanting force of using Lorde's work in the classroom.

[xxi] The poem is full of references to Western culture, from the Bible to the Knight of the Swan legend. I propose these references have a double function. First, they serve metaphorical purposes. For example, 'the word made flesh, made steel, made shit' could be read as a modification of the Biblical syntagm to point to language's capacity to change the world. Second, I suggest, they point to the need to rethink canons and their exclusions, to expand and transform. I thank Tracy Strong for pointing my attention to some of these references.

[xxii] Gloria Anzaldúa proposes something similar when she writes: 'I say mujer mágica, empty yourself. Shock yourself into new ways of perceiving the world, shock your readers into the same. Stop the chatter inside their heads.' (Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 172).

[xxiii] This is Anzaldúa's powerful injunction (1983, p. 172).

[xxiv] For an excellent criticism of the mirage of independence see Drucker (2005).

[xxv] For example, in cinema, Mathieu Kassovitz, one of the most famous French directors of his generation, wrote and directed the award-winning *La Haine*, which denounced the racialised, political, economic, geographical and epistemic exclusion of poor, Muslim, Jewish, and Afro-French citizens. Alain Juppé, then PM of France, requested that the cabinet watch this film and reflect on its powerful depiction of marginalisation. Michael Haneke is another example of an established European cinema coryphaeus who dealt with themes relevant for this paper. His *Caché* has often been read as a denunciation of colonial erasure for its references to French Algerians' exclusion from the community of knowers, political memory, citizenship and ultimately, humanity.

[xxvi] Ferrante talks of her own struggle to come to grips with the experience of being a successful woman writer in a profession dominated by men and patriarchal traditions. She details her frustration with how literary canons are reproduced, despite feminist gains, which – she reminds us – are precarious (2016, especially Letters III).